

For a designated ethics discussion session on EMF exposure

Benefits and Barriers to Sharing Electromagnetic Field (EMF) Exposure Research Findings with Participants

On one side of the debate, some studies have supported exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMF) and association with cancers (such as childhood leukemia), reproductive dysfunction, neurological disorders, birth defects and Alzheimer's disease. For example, for the power line issue, results have fueled debate in communities with calls for closing of schools in proximity to power lines. On the other side of the debate, some studies have not found evidence of an association of exposure to EMF and health effects which has provided support for some utility companies to claim that the science is insufficient to confirm an association and no action is warranted.

Given the often equivocal findings in environmental studies, investigators have to weigh the benefits and costs to share study results with study participants. Institutional requirements, typically from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), can cost the investigator considerable time and resources which may not have been considered in the budget. Sharing study results with participants can encourage their continued interest in research by giving them something back. However what does the data mean at the individual level? EMF exposure at the individual level, particularly from insidious exposures, does not have clear toxic cut points. Consequently, explaining results of estimated exposure levels with participants without definitive answers regarding risk is challenging. These issues as well as other benefits and costs of sharing study results with study participants have ethical implications that will be explored among the session participants.